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ABSTRACT

In much current language teaching using the communicative approach, the use of texts in the classroom is overly restricted. This is true of both the types of texts used and the activities based on them. Three conventional "communicative" uses of texts illustrate this: using texts to practice processes of language use, to serve as models, and to focus on a theme. The chain of exercises used to structure the teaching/learning process (organizing information, implanting skills, developing skills, and using skills) has evidenced some problems: a linguistic focus in disguise, the use of unrelated activities and an excessively long preparation phase for language use, and the overuse of worksheets. A different approach to text use, using different definitions for authenticity and learner involvement, is preferable. It focuses on the potential interest of the text for the student, dismisses quality as a criterion, and de-emphasizes difficulty as a criterion. Classroom use of the materials includes both individual and pair or group work, with discussion in the native language, to minimize frustration and trivialization and to integrate foreign language learning with development of native language communication skills. (MSE)

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Using Texts in a Communicative Approach

The use of texts is probably one of the defining characteristics of classroom language-teaching. In much current "communicative" teaching, however, there seems to us a danger that an over-restricted view is taken both of the types of text that may be used, and of the exploitation activities which may be based on them. Three conventional "communicative" uses of texts will serve to illustrate our concern.

1. Using Texts to Practise Processes of Language Use

One of the key elements of communicative methodology has undoubtedly been the emphasis on giving students practice not only in the forms of the language, but also in the processes of using them. (Morrow, 1981). A wide variety of exercise types has been developed to encourage students to make choices from among a range of language forms in order to bridge information gaps in appropriate ways and achieve a specified outcome. Such exercises usually depend upon a text of some kind in order to provide information to one of the participants which is then shared among the others by means of the target language. These activities are intended to replicate important aspects of real-life language use in the classroom, and are based on the conviction that practising 'doing things' with language will be more fruitful than practising language forms out of context. To that extent, they are certainly valuable, but the point we would wish to argue here is that for many 'communicative' teachers, the concern to set up such activities has perhaps come to dominate the choice of text they might use with their class.

Clearly only texts of a certain type, e.g. timetables, advertisements etc. which have a high factual, informational content lend themselves to exploitation in this way. And since it is this 'information-gap' exploitation which is seen as the essence of 'being communicative', then the range of texts to which students are exposed and the use they make of them are extremely limited. In reality, we would argue, texts have a much wider range of purposes than just the transmission of information, and their 'message' can be more than simply factual.

2. Using Texts as Models

As well as their use to practise the processes of language use, texts are also used to provide samples of the language in action. Through analysis or imitation, students are encouraged to use texts as models for their own language performance. In the conventional 3-phase 'presentation', 'practice' 'production'

model of language teaching, texts of this sort are used chiefly at the 'presentation' stage. Constructed dialogues, recordings of 'authentic interactions', even video clips are used to show how to 'complain', 'apologize', 'ask for information' etc. In essence, this is of course no different from the use of texts (chiefly dialogues) in audio-visual and audio-lingual methodologies, and if one can at least claim the benefit of tradition for it, it is correspondingly hard to base on it a case for methodological advance of the sort which is often associated with the notion of 'communicative'.

3. Using texts to Focus on Theme

An apparently more hopeful area in which to search for methodological advance is the development of teaching units based on topics or themes. Texts serve here a quite different purpose from that set out in either of the two preceding sections. In this case the focus is not on process or model in terms of student use of pre-identified areas of language, but rather it is on the content of the text itself. The rationale for the choice of the text has to do not with the uses to which it can be put, but with the subject-matter involved. The hope is that by choosing texts that are inherently interesting, the teacher will motivate students to involve themselves in work in a particular topic area, and that the foreign language will be 'naturally' used as the medium in which this work will be carried out. It is clear when stated in such bald terms that two major problems are associated with this approach:

1. Having found an 'interesting' text, what exactly does the teacher get the students to do with it?

2. How, in a monolingual class, does the teacher ensure that activities based on the text are carried out in the foreign language when any authentic response to it will inevitably be expressed in the native language?

Interestingly, we know of no discussion in methodology handbooks of the second question. The first, however, has been widely discussed and experimented with in W. Germany in the context of the Federal Working Group on English in Comprehensive Schools (1). The most relevant section of the book in this context is an 'Exercise Typology for Developing Communicative Competence' by Grewer, Moston and Sexton, which sets out "a systematic

collection of exercise types for communicatively oriented English teaching". (Candlin,1981 p.5). In their view, the purpose of classroom foreign language teaching is to enable the learners, via a variety of exercises, to react to different kinds of authentic texts and then gradually to bring them to express their ideas and opinions in the foreign language.

This is carried out by means of a chain of exercises which structure the teaching / learning process as follows. All page references are to Candlin (1981).

1. **Phase A: Organizing Information**

   Exercises in this phase (pp 66-79) focus on ways of encouraging learners to check their basic understanding of a variety of texts, using a range of, e.g. matching / multiple-choice / true-false questions.

2. **Phase B: Implanting Skills**

   Here exercises introduce controlled simulations designed to practise language functions in situations derived from the text. Exercise in this phase (pp 80-107) include switchboards / restoration exercises / defective dialogues.

3. **Phase C: Developing Skills**

   Exercises in this phase are intended to enable learners to make productive use of their language, but still within controlled situations derived from the text. Gradually, however, the exercises encourage language transfer to situations and areas of interest which are personal to the learner. Exercises suggested (pp 108-145) are, for example open dialogues / note-taking / note-making.

4. **Phase D: Using Skills**

   The learners now use what they have developed during the previous phases. Here (pp 140-153) exercises concentrate

on language charts and discourse plans to simulate the production of spoken and written communication.

This is clearly an extremely well thought-out and systematic attempt to develop the learner's communicative competence, but practical experience with this approach has shown up a number of problems.

1. **A linguistic focus in disguise**

   Learners may be allowed to select their themes for language learning, but in the end the purpose for which they work with the texts is to increase their command of the foreign language itself. Edelhoff claims that, "Questions concerning the linguistic means of the text - its language form - occupy a secondary position, underpinning the communicative purpose(s)." (p.52) In our experience, however, this claim that language itself occupies a secondary position is rarely true. Working within this typology, texts are often exploited simply to teach specific language areas, e.g. functions.

2. **Unrelated activities and an over-long preparation phase for language use**

   This approach often involves a highly ingenious but totally unreal grafting on to the text of unrelated activities which have only the most tenuous connection with the original text stimulus. As Edelhoff himself says, exercises and tasks "are not in themselves communicative activities, but are necessary tools for those social encounters in which the learner will find himself in the foreign language as a participant." (p.51) A problem resulting from this is that there is a very long preparation phase until students are finally allowed to use their acquired skills for real communication. Unfortunately, even

> after this long preparation phase, students are rarely able to reach the aim set out by Grewer, Moston and Sexton, i.e to "take part fully and spontaneously in the two authentic types of classroom tasks in foreign language learning: reacting to texts and participating in group discussions." (p.146)

3. **Proliferation of worksheets**

   This approach involves the production and use of large quantities of worksheets. In practice, the focus very often shifts to doing the worksheets rather than involvement with the text. More often than not the worksheet prevents communication as students concentrate on finding their way through the activities and not on communicating with each other at all.

So what?

It is arguable that a large part of the language teaching that takes place in the classroom in a country where the target language is not spoken must follow a typology of this sort. After all, classroom foreign language teaching always involves working within simulated situations. And yet, surely there must be room for something less controlled, more authentic - more communicative.

Of course, it is much easier to be critical of other people's ideas than to solve the problems the criticism may highlight. So it is clearly now time for us to put our heads on the block and suggest what we feel the communicative use of texts actually involves. Three interconnected factors seem to us to be central:

1. Authenticity
2. Involvement
3. Choice

At least two of these may seem at first sight familiar,

but we would argue that the gloss to be given to the terms in our suggested approach is rather different from that conventionally associated with them.

1. **Authenticity**

   This certainly involves authenticity of text in the sense of using material taken from 'real life', not produced specifically for foreign language learners. But equally, if not more, important for us is the notion of 'authenticity of response'. This means that the starting point for the teaching / learning must be the response of the student to the text and this response must be that of the student as an individual, sentient human being.

   Whenever we read, listen to or watch 'texts' in real life, we have reactions or responses to them; we may be interested, indifferent, excited or disgusted. The response may be intellectual, emotional or aesthetic , it may involve cognitive or affective factors - but it is there. Nobody ever reads or listens to anything without some reaction to it and it is this reaction which we feel is the essence of communication, for this is what the text has truly communicated.

2. **Involvement**

   A response to a text is the result of an involvement with it on the part of the reader. Involvement may be of the following kinds, e.g. :

   - Informational: e.g. Does this text tell me anything about..... that I didn't know before?

   - Emotional: e.g. What do I feel about....?

   - Opinion: e.g. Do I agree with.....?

- Character / Behaviour: e.g. Do I identify with any of the characters? Would I behave in the way they do? Do I know anybody who might?

It will be seen that such involvement is open-ended and brings about subjective reactions on the part of the reader / listener.

3. **Choice**

A key factor underlying involvement in a text is the personal choice of the reader / listener. In general in 'the real world', nobody forces us to read, listen to or watch anything in particular. What we read, listen to or watch is the result of a conscious choice to engage in the activity.

Faced with a long train journey, we decide to buy a magazine - or not; we then choose a particular magazine to buy; we choose how to approach the magazine we have bought - cover to cover, start at the back, start at the front or in the middle etc; we choose (how?) to read a particular article: how long do we spend on it? what do we hope to get out of it?; a particular advertisement catches our eye (why?): what is our reaction to it?

In at least these ways, it seems to us that reading, listening or watching always involves choice on the part of the reader, listener or viewer. How can we mirror this in the classroom use of texts?

Putting it into Practice

The application in the classroom of the ideas outlined above

means offering the learner the opportunity to develop an authentic personal response to a piece of textual material through the provision of a framework for personal involvement with the text. For the sake of simplicity, we shall exemplify and discuss possible ways of doing this with reference merely to using written texts.

A key factor in this is the possibility for the student of making choices, and 'choice' can be offered on a number of levels, e.g.

- What is the topic area you wish to read about?
- What is the type of text you wish to read? (e.g. a story, a magazine article, a set of advertisements etc)
- What length of text do you wish to read? A whole text or just an extract?
- What level of difficulty do you want to handle? (i.e. do you want to 'struggle' with something difficult or 'relax' with something easier?)
- What sort of help will you make use of in working with the text? (e.g. dictionaries - monolingual or bilingual; other informants, e.g. fellow students or the teacher.)

A further area of choice is the 'focus for involvement' with the text which the student will adopt. Examples of real-life 'focuses for involvement' were given in the previous section, but it is worth repeating here that these are not intended as 'questions' in the traditional sense. Rather the aim is to offer the student a number of possible perspectives on the text in terms of which to develop a personal reaction. Here are some samples we have used:

- a. Based on a set of advertisements.

  1. Choose two advertisements. Why did you choose these two? Which do you think is the more effective?

  2. Which emotions do you think these

advertisements are aimed at?

3. Can you say what each advertisement is trying to sell?

4. Would you put any of these as a poster on your bedroom wall? Which? Why? Why not?

- b. Based on a number of short stories, including some extracts, and some 'photo-stories'.

1. Why did you choose to read the story / stories you did?

2. How did you feel while you were reading the story?

3. Do you think you would behave like any of the characters?

The point has been made that the emphasis throughout is on developing a personal response to the text on the part of the student. Clearly the nature of the text itself is a vital element in this since, although we wish to offer the student the opportunity to choose a text to work with, we have to ensure that the range of material available to choose from is 'suitable'. What does this imply?

Texts should be examples of 'authentic' English and can be of any kind, from any source. The prime criterion is that they should be, in subject-matter and / or presentation, potentially of interest to the students. This means that the most fruitful sources of texts are often quite outside the traditional hunting ground of teachers looking for material. In a Western European context, the vast range of special-interest or age-group targeted magazines published in Britain are an obvious source. Generally speaking, it is fair to assume that e.g. 17-year olds in Britain are interested in much the same sort of thing as are 17-year olds in Germany. Publications aimed at 17-year olds in Britain are therefore likely to yield material suitable for using with groups of 17-year olds in Germany. Of course one can easily imagine situations where the cultural contrast is much more marked, but the general point remains that the source for texts should be English language versions of reading matter which the students would normally themselves read in their native language. Two

further points should be made at this stage:

- a. "Quality" of text is not a criterion. The aim here is not to improve the students' literary sensibilities (though of course 'literature' may be used for this purpose and others in a different part of the foreign-language curriculum.)

- b. "Difficulty" (in language terms) is only a marginal criterion. The aim is to offer students texts, and involvement with texts, which will arouse their interest and motivation to work out meanings in their own way, in their own terms. Literal understanding of every word may well not be necessary. It is something of a cliche to say in language classes that students need not understand every word, all that is important is to understand 'the important points'. This of course begs the question of how one recognizes 'the important points' without understanding the whole of a text, but in this case the problem is sidestepped. One's reactions to a text depend on the meaning one extracts from it, and if the understanding is only partial the reaction may be different from that of someone who has 'understood' more. Finding this to be the case, the student may well be motivated to go back to try to understand more. Communication through a text involves in our view investment of the self in the text to work out meanings in terms of a personal perspective. Gaining this meaning is a dynamic process, and understanding is not a black and white, either/ or phenomenon. Even partial understanding may be extremely important and extremely significant for the individual concerned. (This point may be clearer when the methodology of implementation, set out in the next section, is considered.) However, it must be said that 'difficulty' in authentic texts often arises from many factors other than

simply language. Background cultural assumptions and references are often much more difficult for non-native speakers to handle, and texts must be considered very carefully to see whether they are 'comprehensible' on this level; if they are not, they may have to be rejected or glossed in some way.

When the texts have been selected, they need to be prepared for use. Ideally, they should be cut out and mounted on card so that a 'bank' of texts can be built up from which the students can choose. As outlined above, for each text a number of possible 'focuses for involvement' need to be developed as well as some indication of other areas of choice which are open to the student in working with the materials.

All this clearly requires a considerable investment of time and possibly also money on the part of the teacher. Ideally the development of such material would be undertaken on a collaborative basis by teachers in a particular school or region.

What happens in the Classroom?

Using texts in this approach involves students working first individually, then in pairs / groups.

1. **Individual Work**

   In this phase the students are invited to choose a text from the 'bank' and to choose their own particular 'focus for involvement'. They are then free to read and react to the text in their own way. Clearly if two students happen to choose the same text and want to work on it together, then 'individual' work can become collaborative pairwork; but we would stress that this is a further element of choice that can be introduced. Pairwork at this stage should not be imposed by the teacher and if students do choose to work together, they must be permitted, and indeed encouraged, to work **in their native language.** This is a point we will

develop in the next section. Work at this stage can also be set as homework. This allows the incorporation of another aspect of choice, i.e. exactly when and under what conditions the text is read.

2. **Pair/Group work**

The second phase involves students coming together to share their reactions to the texts they have been reading in terms of the particular focuses they have chosen. Clearly this can be organized in a number of different ways, e.g. a group of 4 or 5 students who have read the same text might come together to share reactions. Or alternatively 2 or 3 students who have read different texts might come together to exchange information about the content of the texts they have been reading and their reactions to them. In either case, we would want to ensure, except with students of the very highest level, that when groups can be formed that have a common native language, these discussions should take place **in that native language.**

This use of the native language is clearly somewhat controversial, indeed heretical, but we would justify our prescription as follows:

1. In terms of 'authenticity of response', discussed earlier. In other words, for the vast majority of learners of a foreign language a personal response to a text in that foreign language is likely to be "felt" in the native language. Attempting to mediate the response through the foreign language will merely lead to **frustration** (as it is realized that the foreign language resources are not adequate to express the reactions) or to **trivialization** (if the response is brought down to the level that can be expressed).

2. In terms of 'language need'. The language required for the articulation of a felt response to text seems to us quite different in nature from any foreign language need which the students might conceivably face in 'the real world'. To attempt to develop a productive competence in this sort of language seems to us both unrealistic and unnecessary. The development of receptive competence in the foreign language should not be hindered by a requirement to develop a productive competence to talk about what has been read.

3. Most radically, the use of the native language to talk about foreign language texts in this way offers the possibility in the school system of integrating foreign language work with the development of communication skills in the native language. In this way the development of language 'across the curriculum' can be fostered in a concrete way. This may seem a utopian ideal in many current teaching contexts; it should not be overlooked, however, as a way forward.

Conclusion

It has to be said that the exploitation ideas put forward here have, at the time of writing, been tried on only a small scale. Initial reactions have been extremely favourable, but their adoption has a profound effect on the way language classrooms in which they are applied operate and on the perceptions of what 'learning a foreign language' means for both teachers and students. They imply objectives for language classes which are couched in less concrete and quantifiable terms than those which teachers (and education systems) are currently used to identifying, but which are perhaps more central to language use; they imply an approach which stresses the promotion of **learning** rather than the performance of **teaching**; they imply also the development of the learner's involvement in and responsibility for what he / she is doing. Above all, they offer

much to both teachers and students in terms of motivation. For teachers there is the stimulation of finding interesting texts and bringing them into the classroom; for students there is the perception that the foreign language has a reality outside the classroom. Working with it 'voluntarily', outside a teacher-imposed framework, students may realize that foreign-language texts have something to say, can be interesting, and mean something more than just a structure or some new words that have to be learned as an unpleasant consequence of being read. These ideas may be seen by some as dangerous; but is it any wonder we find them exciting?

Notes

1. The results of this group's work were first published in 1978 under the title 'Kommunikativer Englischunterricht' (Langenscheidt/Longman). This was translated into English by Candlin (1981) and contains a number of position papers on the communicative curriculum (contributions from C. Candlin, C. Edelhoff, H.E. Piepho). In addition there is an extensive exercise typology by U. Grewer, T. Moston and M. Sexton.

2. Candlin (1981) p.5

References

Candlin C. (1981): 'The Communicative Teaching of English: Principles and an Exercise Typology' Longman

Morrow K.E.(1981): 'Principles of Communicative Methodology' in **Communication in the Classroom** ed. Johnson & Morrow Longman